

Sierra program aims to nurture forest

Plan targets management, jobs and environment.

Posted at 08:08 PM on Sunday, May. 02, 2010

By Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee



A state agency overseeing the 22-county Sierra region is preparing an ambitious plan to add jobs in mountain communities, keep forests healthy, protect water supplies and reduce fire danger.

And, to make sure the Sustainable Sierra Nevada Initiative has wide support, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy is working with timber, environmental, biomass and government officials to develop it.

Most agree that forests need thinning to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire, and those forest operations could create new job opportunities.

But balancing forest management with environmental concerns has been a tricky proposition.

The initiative "is an opportunity to move things forward in a different way," said Jim Branham, executive officer for the Auburn-based conservancy, a state agency charged with promoting the Sierra's environment and economy. The initiative will set principles to follow in the coming years, providing the framework for specific policies, officials said.

Almost everyone agrees on the types of principles needed in the initiative, much of which has to do with clearing brush and tree fuels that can spark large fires, said Craig Thomas, executive director of Sierra Forest Legacy, an environmental group based in Sacramento that is one of six environmental organizations supporting the proposal.

But there is not full buy-in by all sides yet on all the initiative's proposals.

Brian Nowicki, California climate policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said some of the initiative's principles are too vague. "It makes overly general statements about fire and it could be mischaracterizing how fire really is working in the Sierra," he said. His group wants to better understand the conservancy's fire and biomass proposals. Branham said he doesn't expect unanimous support for the plan. "Some environmentalists think we shouldn't do thinning and some on the other side will think we are not aggressive enough," he said.

In addition to fire management, the initiative addresses the need to develop jobs for residents in the economically struggling Sierra.

Steve Wilensky, a Calaveras County supervisor, said his district once had 22 lumber mills, but the last closed 16 years ago.

Now, more than 25% of the work force is unemployed and 86% of children are eligible for at least partially paid school lunches.

But there is hope: Wilensky helped write a jobs-creation program that began in 2005 with the aim of putting people to work thinning forests, moving wood chips to a biomass plant and burning the wood to create electricity. He also sees a market for wood pellets, posts and poles, pressed logs and craftsman woodworking products. Wilensky's program is a model for some of the initiative's proposals.

New Sierra jobs could include forest thinning, biomass energy plants or manufacturing forest-related items, such as pellets for wood stoves.

There are 13 wood pellet plants in the western United States. California, the largest wood pellet consumer, has none, said Warren Alford of Arnold, community forest program coordinator with Sierra Forest Legacy.

"There is a great opportunity to attract an industry that can use a low-value material ... and create jobs," he said. Sierra Forest Products in Terra Bella, near Porterville, is the only mill in California south of Tuolumne County.

The company also runs a biomass plant that produces five to seven megawatts. One megawatt can power 1,000 homes for one hour on average.

Larry Duysen, woods manager for the 130-employee company, said he is impressed by the conservancy's proposals.

"The initiative is talking about sustainable rural economies and sustainable forests," he said. "We certainly support that."

The initiative also addresses the need to keep grazing livestock from fouling mountain water that flows through streams and rivers and winds up in the taps of Bay Area and Southern California customers.

Among the ideas being considered: charging a few cents per municipal water customer to pay for grants to reduce pollution related to grazing.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy's board is accepting public comments and could approve the initiative resolution at its June board meeting.

Addie Jacobson, a Calaveras County resident and member of Ebbets Pass Forest Watch, a group that has sued over logging practices in the past, said industry and environmentalists have found areas of mutual understanding while working on the initiative.

The Sierra's management has been haphazard up to now, and the initiative should help change that, she said.

"We've tried a lot of other stuff, so let's try consensus and see where we get," she said.